

## Independence and individualism: Conflated values in farmer cooperation?

Emery, Steven B

DOI:

[10.1007/s10460-014-9520-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9520-8)

License:

Other (please specify with Rights Statement)

*Document Version*

Peer reviewed version

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Emery, SB 2015, 'Independence and individualism: Conflated values in farmer cooperation?', *Agriculture and Human Values*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 47-61. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9520-8>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

### **Publisher Rights Statement:**

The final publication is available at Springer via: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9520-8>

Checked September 2015

### **General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

### **Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

## Independence and individualism—conflated values in farmer cooperation?

**Steven B. Emery**

School of Geography, Earth, and Environmental Sciences, University of Birmingham,  
Edgbaston, Birmingham, B15 2TT, United Kingdom,  
Email: s.emery@bham.ac.uk

This article has been published in *Agriculture and Human Values* and should be cited as:

Emery, S.B., 2015. Independence and Individualism: Conflated Values in Farmer Cooperation? *Agriculture and Human Values* **32**(1), 47-61.

The final publication is available via Springer at:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s10460-014-9520-8>

**Abstract:** Social scientists have long examined the changing role of the individual, and the influence of individualism in social and economic arrangements as well as behavioral decisions. With respect to co-operative behavior among farmers, however, the ideology of individualism has been little theorized in terms of its relationship to the longstanding virtue of independence. This paper explores this relationship by combining analysis of historical literature on the agricultural cooperative movement with the accounts of contemporary English farmers. I show that the virtue of independence is deployed to justify a variety of cooperative (formal and informal) and non-cooperative practices and that, despite apparently alternative interpretations, independence is most often conflated with individualistic premises. That conflation, I argue, leads farmers to see their neighbors as natural competitors: as those from whom which independence must be sought. This has the effect of masking the structural dependencies which farmers face (such as lenders and large purchasers) and limits the alternatives available to them to realize a view of independence that is maintained, rather than opposed, by interdependent collective action. Thus perceived, individualism is an ideological doctrine that succeeds by appealing to the virtue of independence, while simultaneously denying its actual realization.

**Keywords:** Independence · Farmers · Individualism · Cooperation · Autonomy · Anthropology

## Introduction

Social scientists have long examined the changing role of the individual, and the influence of individualism in social and economic arrangements as well as behavioral decisions. And while individualism has been examined to some extent in terms of cooperative behavior among farmers (Blackstock et al. 2006; Gröger 1981; Stofferahn 2004), it has not been critically theorized in terms of its relationship to the longstanding virtue of independence. A value in independence has often been used to explain the lack of cooperation among (particularly British) farmers (Fearne 1998; Marsden et al. 1986; May 2012; May and Tate 2011; Spriggs et al. 2000), but little work has been undertaken to explore the sociocultural and ideological underpinnings of that concept and the dynamic inter-relations between them. Instead of taking independence to be a fixed and essential virtue of farmers that inhibits cooperative behavior, in this paper I seek to explore the variety of interpretations associated with independence and how it has been influenced by an ideological doctrine of individualism.

I take my lead in this endeavor from the inspirational but largely unheeded rallying cry of Raymond Williams who insisted that “we have to be able to explain, in related terms, both the persistence and the historicity of concepts” (1973, p. 348). By paying close attention to the historical and sociocultural dynamism of important concepts and values, Williams demonstrated how they are manipulated and regulated to suit the dominant mode of production (capitalism). Moreover, he demonstrated the ideological means by which alternative understandings are denied, as dominant interpretations are presented *prima facie* as the enduring natural order of things. I have elsewhere developed this idea to explore the ideological manipulation of a farming virtue in *beneficent change* or *improvement* and have suggested that the persistence yet mutability of important cultural values should be seen as refractions of one another (Emery 2010). In other words, the cultural importance of particular concepts renders them susceptible to manipulation and reconfiguration according to changing situations and changing interests, which, in turn, ensures their persistence and continuing salience. Foucault (1976, p. 86) made clear that power is exercised most effectively when it masks a considerable part of itself. It is by masking the very mutability of important concepts, therefore, that ideology works to impose specific interpretations on culturally motivating values and norms of behavior.

It should be noted, however, that if concepts are constantly subject to revision then this must mean that ideological attempts to impose dominant interpretations are never wholesale nor complete (Emery 2010). This allows, therefore, that alternative understandings (although often marginalized) that lay challenge to the dominant interpretation continue to be nurtured.

In this paper it is my aim to examine the farming virtue of independence, and its conflation with individualism, in this light. This is achieved by studying cooperative behavior and attitudes toward farmer-farmer cooperation. The conflation, I suggest, serves to deny *actual* independence from being realized, since it pits farmer against farmer in the quest for independence, and detracts from the possibility of challenging the structural dependencies that farmers face by working together. Through the paper I will explore the complex and varying interpretations of independence put forth by farmers and commentators on cooperation. Before doing that, however, let me make clear what I think independence *should* mean and why I think its conflation with individualism can be regarded as ideological. Individualism places paramount value on the individual, opposing notions such as the “social whole” or “collective good,” and there is an assumption that individual freedoms can only be guaranteed by the freedom of the market (Harvey 2005; Lukes 2006 [1973]). Under such a guise, rational economic self-interest serves as the guide to behavior and interdependence in pursuit of collective interests is opposed. What I mean by *actual* independence, in contrast, is a concept that is not opposed by interdependence but by dependence (in the sense of subordination) (Goldschmidt 1971, p. 135). Moreover, I will argue that interdependence is necessary for farmers in their quest for independence from the structures of finance capital and the monopolizing power of large purchasers and supermarkets (Marsden et al. 1989). In short, individualism promotes the pursuit of self-interest while mystifying collective interests, whereas actual independence requires demystification and the pursuit of collective interests.

Throughout the paper I refer to “ideology” in the specific Marxian sense and apply it to individualism according to Lukes (2006 [1973]). Thus I use it principally in relation to capitalist ideology that acts as an instrument of power by dominating the popular conscience while obscuring the popular interest. Specifically in relation to individualism, Lukes (2006 [1973]) has shown how that doctrine succeeded by harnessing the broader societal virtues of liberty and equality and framing them within a very specific libertarian and market-based philosophy. It is from this perspective that I argue the conflation between individualism and independence to be

ideological. To develop this argument it will be necessary to explore the history of the concept of independence and cooperative behavior among farmers as well as to explore the varied use of independence as a virtue among English farmers today. To that end, the paper combines original empirical research as well as insights drawn from the contemporary and historical literature on farmer cooperation.

The empirical data is informed largely by semi-structured interviewing with 33 English farmers in three case study locations (Peterborough, East Midlands; Grafton, West Midlands; Tamar, Southwest). The case study locations were chosen in areas with an identified need for increased farmer collaboration in the delivery of landscape-scale conservation. This was principally to inform emergent policy priorities in England and Wales (Lawton et al. 2010) which called for a “step-change” toward a more joined-up and landscape-scale approach to conservation and maintenance of ecosystem services (for further details of the rationale and the sampling procedure see Emery and Franks 2012; McKenzie et al. 2013). The overall approach was to examine farmers’ favorability to joining collaborative agri-environment schemes within the context of their existing views on (1) agri-environment schemes, and (2) cooperation with other farmers. The material presented in this paper draws on the findings related to the second of these contexts. In particular, it explores the relationship between the commonly held value in independence among farmers and their views on agricultural cooperation. My own longer-term ethnographic research among English farmers had revealed the pervasiveness of this value (Emery 2010), and an initial pilot study for the project revealed that “independence” was often cited as an impediment to cooperation. Thus the research sought to explore the nature of this value and how it influenced farmers’ views towards, and their involvement in, a variety of types of cooperative behavior (ad-hoc reciprocity, local arrangements for cooperation in production, and buying/selling groups). During interviewing farmers would be asked if they valued their independence, and this line of questioning would be followed-up and opened up using the principles of “active” interviewing (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) to explore how they interpreted it, where they thought it came from, and how it affected cooperation between farmers.

By farm size the sample comprised of 42% large farms (> 200 ha), 27% medium-sized farms (100–200 ha) and 30% small farms (<100 ha). By type of farming it comprised of 42% arable farms, 31% livestock/dairy, and 27% mixed arable and livestock. These figures, however, show marked regional differentiation: In Peterborough, farms were wholly arable and modally

large in size; in Grafton there was an even mix of arable and livestock farms of modally medium size, and; in Tamar farms were principally livestock and modally small in size. While regional and structural differences between interviewees offers one approach to examine differences in favorability toward cooperation, my approach in this paper is not to distinguish farmers along such structural lines, except where such distinctions contribute to the analysis of the value in independence. For the emphasis here is not, per se, to explore the full range of factors that do, or do not influence cooperative attitudes and practices. It is to focus *qualitatively* on the widespread value in independence and to interpret its more subtly nuanced complexities and contradictions. Furthermore, when working with small samples and with farms that each have their own unique combination of characteristics, it can be difficult, and even misleading, to try and generalize or to interpret responses according to farmer “types” (Emery 2010; Siebert et al. 2006).

With this paper I hope to make three principal contributions. First, following Williams’ lead, I hope to demonstrate the importance of an historical and empirical focus on particular concepts and values for understanding the workings and effects of ideology in agricultural (and other) contexts. More particularly it contributes to my own broader project of demonstrating how ideology works by re-interpreting and monopolizing long-standing and culturally important values within farming communities (Emery 2014 in press, 2010).<sup>1</sup> Secondly, by shedding light on the implications of the conflation between independence and individualism, I hope to encourage farmers (and those working with them) to consider how they might conceive of independence differently and, in doing so, subject the normative barriers to farmer-farmer cooperation to critical reflection. Thirdly, and related to the second point, the paper contributes to the wider literature on collective approaches to farmer autonomy, such as the extensive body of work on food sovereignty (Desmarais 2002; Pimbert 2008; Wittman et al. 2010) and the van der Ploeg-inspired work on “repeasantization” and community-led resistance to globalization and liberalized food markets (Schneider and Niederle 2010; Van der Ploeg 2008).

In the following sections I present a brief introduction to the literature on farmer cooperation and independence, as well as to the relevant theories of individualism and ideology.

---

<sup>1</sup> It is important to stress that this work does not deny the ability of farmers to challenge dominant interpretations. Indeed, it argues that important values are constantly being negotiated in the process of everyday social interaction.

My argument is then substantiated through the presentation of empirical and secondary data, before reflecting and drawing conclusions.

### **Cooperation and independence among British farmers**

Recent work has explored the sociocultural contexts of farmer independence or autonomy (Niska et al. 2012; Stock and Forney forthcoming), of farmer cooperation (Sutherland and Burton 2011), and the relationship between them (Emery and Franks 2012). This relationship has also been more frequently posited, almost assumed, in much of the wider literature on farmer cooperation and cooperatives (Fearne 1998; Marsden et al. 1986; May 2012; May and Tate 2011; Spriggs et al. 2000). Thus far however, it has been taken for granted that a value in independence is an impediment toward cooperative behavior. But is this necessarily so? What is the nature of the relationship between independence and cooperative behavior? And just what exactly does a value in independence entail? How, moreover, do the social, cultural, environmental, and ideological contexts—and their changeability—interact with this value? I hope to address at least some of these questions (and at the very least to emphasize the importance and necessity of asking them in the first place) as the paper progresses. Before that, this section has the more modest aim of examining the origins and development of independence and cooperative behavior among British farmers.

#### **Farmer cooperation**

“The British farmer is by habit and prejudice averse to cooperation” (Rew 1913, p.115).

In contrast to more modern and formal understandings of agricultural cooperation, the oldest form of cooperation between farmers has been reported as ancient and informal, consisting primarily of neighborly help (Sargent 1982; Smith 1961). Moreover, Morley (1975, p. 125) suggests that farmers are as renowned for “the practice of good neighborliness and mutual help in emergencies ... as they are for their independence in normal times.” This immediately points

to a contradiction in perfunctory understandings about cooperation and independence. For if, as the quote introducing this section suggests, farmers are averse to cooperation, then how can they also be renowned for being neighborly co-operators? Morley, in the above quote hints at a distinction between attitudes to formal cooperation during “normal” times, and neighborly behavior on infrequent “emergency” occasions. I will return to this question as I delve deeper into interpretations of independence and its relationship with different cooperative practices through analysis of the empirical material. Such archaic and social associations may have their roots in, or have been more prevalent during, older systems of land organization such as the mediaeval Open Field system prior to the Enclosures of the 14th–19th centuries (Sargent 1982).

Prior to the establishment of the formal cooperative movement sit a range of other farmer associations, the most prevalent of which were the farmers’ clubs (Pretty 1991; Rew 1913; Warman 1922). Farmer groups and clubs were common in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and seem to have run contemporaneously and congruently with informal cooperative behavior, but became less prevalent and appear less companionable with modern formal cooperatives. They often met in public houses, were formed by farmers themselves, provided a simple form of cooperative insurance and provided a space for farmers to meet, share knowledge, and award prizes (Pretty 1991; Warman 1922). They are recorded as a category of “social and educational” combination by Rew alongside “political” and “commercial” categories (Rew 1913, p. 95). Interestingly, in more contemporary categorizations of cooperation the emphasis is only on sub-types of “commercial cooperation” and the significance of the political and social categories appears to have diminished.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Rew shows that the farmers’ clubs were often perceived to be associations of intemperance and ill-repute but argues that they played an important social function. Rew cites Mr. Clare Sewell Read in 1896 on the loss of the market dinner/tea: “I can remember when 50 or 60 farmers used to sit down at a hotel in Norwich, at three o’clock, and never think of getting up until five. The result was that during these two hours there was an immense amount of information imparted, and a confederation and co-operation resulted among those jolly men which really does not exist now” (Rew 1913: 96–97). One can imagine that the demise of this potentially subversive space, was facilitated by the moral aspersions cast against it.



The beginning of formal cooperation in Britain is usually attributed to the establishment of the Agricultural and Horticultural Society in 1867 (Morley 1975; Sargent 1982). The stated objective of agricultural cooperatives was:

... to provide its members with a commercial service for the promotion of their economic interests, which will operate at the lowest cost consistent with the quality, maintenance, and improvement of the service, and remain under producers' control. (Morley 1975, p. 60)

The three principal types of formal cooperation that emerged are: (1) cooperative purchase; (2) cooperative distribution and sale; and (3) co-operative production. While commercial and economic interests are seen to underlie the motives for agricultural cooperation, Worsley (1971, p. 2) maintains that it has always also been some way connected with the wider social ideals of the cooperative movement. In particular, the movement sought to institutionalize altruism and, although always in tension, to limit self-interest. Since its inception formal cooperation has waxed and waned in the United Kingdom as conditioned by (among others) changes in government, the impact of war, changes in legislation, the varying effectiveness of the official cooperative associations and federations, and European integration into the Common Market and the Common Agricultural Policy (see Sargent 1982). Nevertheless, throughout these changes agricultural cooperation in the UK has remained of consistently lower significance to the sector than in other European countries (Sargent 1982). In 2008 there were a reported 450 agricultural cooperatives in the UK with a combined turnover of £4.5 billion (approximately €5.5 billion) (Cooperatives UK 2012). In the same year this compares with 3,000 cooperatives in France with a turnover of €80 billion; 2,994 cooperatives in Germany with a turnover of €44.5 billion; and, 150 cooperatives in Ireland with a turnover of €12.6 billion (Cogeca 2010). One possible reason for the differences across Europe is that the UK has traditionally had larger farm holdings and has sought to achieve economies of scale through amalgamation of holdings and increasing farm size, rather than through pooling the resources of smaller family farms (Morley 1975). As I will show, however, although cooperatives were often espoused as a means of protecting the smaller farmer, it has not necessarily been the case in the UK that smaller farmers have been the principal beneficiaries of formal agricultural cooperation.

Of the three principal types of formal cooperative, the vast majority are for purchase and sale, with very few cooperatives established by farmers to physically pool their work and resources in production. This might be because such arrangements have remained largely informal and work best on a reciprocal one-to-one, dyadic basis (Henrich and Henrich 2007; Sutherland and Burton 2011). Henrich and Henrich (2007, p. 63), talking about cooperation generally, and Sutherland and Burton (2011, p. 245), talking specifically about farmers, highlight the importance of reputation in informal reciprocal relationships. The former propose that cooperating at a loss can be an important way to enhance reputation and make the accrual of benefits from future cooperation more likely. The latter, meanwhile, suggest that a farmer with a reputation as a “good farmer,” in a general sense, is also more likely to be cooperated with by other farmers. What happens, however, if a virtue in independence is wrapped up with notions of the good farmer (Emery and Franks 2012), and the farmer who seeks to cooperate, or needs to cooperate, is somehow seen as publicly admitting his or her failure to uphold this ideal of autonomy? In later analyzing the empirical material I will seek to reconcile this apparent contradiction as the mutability of interpretation of the independence virtue is explored further through particular reference to cooperation in production.

### The virtue of independence

Scholars of rural life have long made an association between farming, a value in independence and its potential affect on farming behaviors (Emery and Franks 2012; Gasson 1973; Ilbery 1983; Stock and Forney forthcoming; Sullivan et al. 1996; Sutherland and Burton 2011). The reasons for this association, however, have been less explored. There is a tentative suggestion of a rather materialist interpretation, which posits that the value is necessitated by the isolated actualities of farming and patterns of settlement and as an adjustment to environmental conditions. Referring to a value in independence among pastoralists in Africa, Goldschmidt (1971, p. 136) argues that it is “not merely a matter of personal choice, but is necessitated by environmental circumstances.” When considering the lack of cooperation and the independence of British farmers, meanwhile, Rew (1913, p. 97) also hints at a circumstantial root: “the farmer, by the nature of his calling, is too much alone—too constantly isolated.” This isolation, then,

may have privileged farmers that were very practically able to do things for themselves. Emery and Franks (2012) have also proposed a combined cultural/pragmatic motive for independence that is closely associated with the practically necessary and culturally valued concept of *timeliness*. Timeliness relates to the necessity in farming to be able to act quickly according to prevalent uncertainties and, in particular, to the vagaries of the weather. Emery and Franks (2012, p. 228) also propose that a value in independence could be culturally self-reinforcing as it prevents the exploration among farmers of mutually beneficial solutions by virtue of a fear of being seen to contravene the normative ideal of the independent farmer. While Stock and Forney (forthcoming), propose a certain commonality in a value in autonomy among farmers, they also demonstrate, through an exploration of the values and motives of farmers in New Zealand and Switzerland, the plasticity in understanding and application of that value. In contrasting the interpretations of sheep and dairy farmers, for instance, they argue that the opposition in their interpretations of autonomy “show that in different contexts, with different farming practices and systems, the ideal of liberty in the work is deeply rooted in farmers’ subjectivity ... [which] is coevolutionary with existing structures and contexts” (Stock and Forney forthcoming). I will later explore this interpretability and consider its significance in terms of ideology and cooperative behavior. Prior to that, it is necessary to briefly introduce individualism and its sociocultural and historical development and implications.

### **Individualism and ideology**

Just as the ideal of independence is mutable and open to interpretation it is important to point out that so too is individualism a concept incorporating a multiplicity of interpretations and connotations (Lukes 2006 [1973]; Weber 1930). For my purposes here, however, there are two important elements to draw out. The first is the historical and contemporary relationship of a value in the individual to the organization of society, while the second is the ideological underpinnings of the various doctrines of individualism.

In the anthropological literature the most extensive exposition of individualism has been provided by Dumont (1986). It is the dialectic relationship between the elemental individual and the ideal individual that Dumont presents as central to a historical relationship between

individualism and societal organization: “When we speak of man as an individual, we designate two concepts at once: an object out there, and a value” (Dumont 1986, p. 25). Dumont contrasts individualism, placing paramount value on the individual, with holism, which places paramount value in society as whole. He develops his argument in opposition to, among others, the social evolutionary theory of Hobbes and Rousseau. Dumont maintains an evolutionary interpretation, however, but this is presented in the direct reverse of Hobbes and Rousseau. Hobbes and Rousseau, Dumont shows, both present an evolutionary transition from “man of nature” to “political man” through the development of the social contract. Both of their views (although apparently opposing each other), he argues, represent a transition from individualistic premises to anti-individualist conclusions as they represent the “welding into a social or political body [of] people who think of themselves as individuals” (Dumont 1986, p. 86). In contrast, the transition between “non-modern” and “modern” societies presented by Dumont is one of a shift from an idea of the “outworldly individual” to the “inworldly individual.” Hence, in “non-modern” societies the individual can only exist as an outcast from society, whereas in “modern societies” individualism is the cardinal value that holds society together. In contrast to Hobbes and Rousseau, therefore: “far from their being incompatibility between individual development and service to the social whole, it is ‘in and for the whole’ that the individual develops” (Dumont 1986, p. 135). Dumont traces this shift from the outworldly to the inworldly individual through the incarnation of a value in individualism through the rise of Christianity and culminating in Calvin’s theocracy, by which time “*the individualist value rules without restriction or limitation*” (Dumont 1986, p. 53, emphasis in original). Individualism thus becomes a value *of* modern society rather than one that is opposed to society as such (Bauman 2001; Elias 1991).

Macfarlane (1978), referring specifically to the much-studied English individualism, presents historical evidence to suggest that its origins go back at least as far as the 13th century. He uses this evidence to challenge eminent theorists such as Marx, Weber, and Polanyi who argued that the rise of individualism was associated with the reorganization of society in the 16th–17th centuries and, in particular, with the rise of capitalism. By studying landholding, inheritance and kinship systems Macfarlane presents individualism as something essentially English: “within the recorded period covered by our documents, it is not possible to find a time when an Englishman did not stand alone” (Macfarlane 1978, p. 269). The corollary of Macfarlane’s interpretation is to refute the arguments for a “Great Transformation” (Polanyi

1945) at the end of the middle ages and to suggest that those changes were in some way a consequence of this pre-existing English predisposition: “Individualism, however defined, predates sixteenth-century changes and can be said to shape them all” (Macfarlane 1978, p. 269).

Riches (2000) presents a rather more nuanced look at the relationship between egalitarian values and individualist practices among Inuit hunter-gatherers and Western New Age societies. He argues that egalitarian values are manifest at the cosmological level, while unfettered selfish action is manifest at the level of individual strategy. Moreover, he argues that rather than being contradictory, the selfish action is itself legitimated by the egalitarian cosmology (Riches 2000, pp. 676–677). This is achieved, he argues, through the concept of the “holistic person” that “provides an account of human propensities, such that action (reflecting autonomy) discrepant with the collective value (equality of outcome) is deemed not to be so” (Riches 2000, p. 677). Without elaborating on Riches’ evidence, the important point to draw out is that individualist practices and egalitarian or holistic values need not be mutually exclusive (but can instead be mutually constitutive). Implicit in this argument, therefore, is a suggestion that it may not be so straightforward to detect a marked or even gradual transition from holism to individualism (cf. Dumont) and, moreover, that evidence of individualist practices does not necessarily serve as evidence for individualist cosmology (cf. Macfarlane). Might it be the case, for instance, that Macfarlane’s evidence for individualism is merely a manifestation of individual practices that remain incorporated and legitimated within a non-individualistic cosmology? As part of his evidence for the longevity of individualism Macfarlane draws on the remarks of foreign visitors to England between 1497 and 1600. He (rather casually) notes that these visitors discussed the “independence, individuality, and freedom of the English” (Macfarlane 1978, p. 262). But are independence, freedom, and even individuality to be seen as evidence for a doctrine of individualism, or might they instead represent extant values wholly compatible with holistic society? Moreover, is Macfarlane’s conflation of these terms with individualism itself a reflection of the work of ideology, whereby existing cultural values are made to appear synonymous with newer and more repressive interpretations (Emery 2010, p. 211)? It might be less straightforward to suggest, therefore, that such an ideology cannot be aligned to the rise of capitalism in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Taking individuality as a brief example, this is a term according to Cohen (1994, p. 168) that is “ideologically neutral ... and ... therefore quite different from individualism.” It is

associated with notions of individual uniqueness, originality, and self-realization (Lukes 2006 [1973], p. 30), which were paradoxically suppressed by individualism. For instance in late 20th century Conservative Britain which at the same time as espousing personal responsibilities and individual freedoms simultaneously sought to homogenize and reign-in “the self-conscious, self-directing idiosyncratic individual who resisted conformity” (Cohen 1994, p. 172).<sup>3</sup> The argument I am developing, therefore, is that individualism is not synonymous with independence, with freedom, or with individuality, but it is the work of ideology to make them *appear* so. Steven Lukes’ (2006 [1973]) short book *Individualism* has been instructive in the development of this argument, and his ideas shall be returned to in the concluding section as the empirical and historical material presented in the following section is reflected upon.

### **Individualism and independence in cooperative practices among farmers**

The motives for formal cooperation—two alternatives

I earlier referred to the work of Worsley (1971), who pointed out that formal agricultural cooperation exhibited a certain tension between self-interested motives on the one hand and altruistic motives on the other. It is apparent from the literature that the tensions and contradictions in agricultural cooperation represent deep-seated competing political ideologies and that the early efforts to encourage cooperation approached this task from different perspectives.<sup>4</sup> These alternative perspectives are fascinatingly found in a single book called *Agricultural cooperation in England and Wales* by William Warman published in 1922. Fascinating because the author of the foreword to the book (Leslie Scott, then Chairman of the

---

<sup>3</sup> As Dumont argues, it is not the lack of differences among men that stands individualism apart from holism. Instead it is the nature of the relations between men and things. In holistic society, he argues, it is the relationship between men that is important, whereas individualism places greater emphasis on the relationship between men and things (Dumont 1986, p. 106).

<sup>4</sup> For an interesting and recent overview of the different discourses motivating agricultural cooperation in the US see Stofferahn (2010).

Agricultural Organization Society) and William Warman are both extolling the benefits of formal agricultural cooperation and seeking to encourage its wider uptake, but they do so from very different perspectives that epitomize the political situation in Britain at that time. It is important to point out, however, that these differences in perspective are not made explicit in the book, which itself serves to obfuscate the alternative motives for formal agricultural cooperation. Compare the following extracts:

(i) Some attempts have been made to supercede [sic] the *individual* farmer and to institute factory farms of 20 or 30 thousand acres with the express object of applying the principle of combination; but this method cannot be applied to the industry without sacrificing what to the nation is an invaluable asset. We want the small *independent* farmer; we have nearly half a million *independent* farmers ... They are *an independent race*, sturdy and not easily swayed by the gusts of popular opinion; in fine they constitute a steadying factor in the combination of forces which actuate our body politic. An extension of factory farming by big limited liability companies would supersede the *independent* farmer, and we do not want him superseded. But the only way that we can keep him and at the same time give him the advantages of commercial combination, is by the system of organization in co-operative societies .... (Scott 1922, p. viii, emphases added)

(ii) There is a wide difference, both of practice and theory, between agricultural and industrial co-operation. Agricultural co-operation is designed with the express object of preserving *individual initiative*—it all ultimately depends on the enterprise of the *independent farmer*. As I see it, the great merit of the system, from a national point of view, lies in the very fact that it does preserve the *independent farmer and individual initiative*. In regard to industrial co-operation, it is customary for private traders to allege that its object is to supersede *individual initiative* and to put in its place some communistic system of industry and trade... This is no place to join in the controversy between the industrial co-operatives and the traders, and I express no opinion whatever upon it. But I think it important that the public should realize that agricultural co-operation stands completely outside that discussion, and that support

of it does not involve taking sides in the industrial controversy. (Scott 1922, pp. ix–x, emphases added)

(iii) The smallholder requires to have an *independent* and self-reliant character. These very qualities that make his success, tend to make him reluctant to combine (Warman 1922, p. 139, emphasis added).

(iv)... in making some observation on the probable future of the [cooperative] movement, the first and most important point to make is that the *spirit* in which it is developed will make or mar its success ... But the mere word “co-operation” suggests that *spirit of neighborliness*, which is or should be the mark of rural life. It is not too much to say that *co-operation to be successful should not merely begin with neighborliness but should carry the same spirit to its logical conclusion*. If the farmers of the country decide to combine for business purposes that would be an achievement in itself. But one can hardly anticipate that any great loyalty would be felt merely for a number of large business undertakings. *It is the idea that farmers should combine to help each other, which is vital*. On the presence or absence of that *spirit* the final position of co-operation depends. (Warman 1922, pp. 172–173, emphases added)

Amid the wonderful rhetoric and many points of interest in the above passages I will draw out two specific points for my current purpose. The first is the contrasting ideological underpinnings to the arguments of Scott and Warman, while the second is that both use and misuse/misinterpret the virtue of independence (in different ways) in presenting their arguments.

Scott presents a view of agricultural co-operation that is founded on self-interest since he believes it to preserve “individual initiative.” He is also at pains to stress that it differs from the industrial cooperative movement, which has been allied to communism. While maintaining that he expresses no opinion on the industrial issue, by clearly separating agricultural cooperation from this movement, and by presenting agricultural cooperation as a means of preserving individual initiative, he does just that: expresses a forceful opinion. Warman, in contrast, promotes the necessity of altruistic motives for formal cooperation and plays down the



significance of self-interest. He hints that cooperation will fail if it proceeds only on the basis of individualist “business purposes,” and that success will only be achieved by the extension of the “spirit of neighborliness” to “its logical conclusion,” with farmers combining “to help each other.”

Scott stresses that independence is not only a value to farmers, but that the ‘independent farmer’ is of value to the nation as a whole. In the same breath Scott argues that agricultural cooperation is a means of preserving “the independent farmer and individual initiative.” He also switches between using “the individual farmer” and “the independent farmer.”<sup>5</sup> Both of these subtle plays with language ensure that Scott not only argues that agricultural cooperation is the only way to preserve the independent farmer that “we” all value so highly, but that individualist practices are also the only way of preserving “him”: that independence and individual initiative are one and the same thing. Warman meanwhile, like the assumptions that this paper sets out to challenge, suggests that the virtue of independence is an impediment to cooperation among farmers. Both Scott and Warman, therefore, use and misuse or misinterpret a virtue in independence in pressing their cases. While Scott’s might be deemed a sinister ideological obfuscation between independence and individual initiative, Warman’s usage is reflective of the same general process, since it presents a view of independence and interdependence between farmers as opposed. In short, then, both usages suggest that the ideology of Scott is in the ascendancy, since independence is seen as something preserved by the type of self-interested cooperation envisaged by Scott, but something that is seen as oppositional to the type of altruistic cooperation envisaged by Warman. My argument is that the opposite should be true.

---

<sup>5</sup> In a different and contemporary context Rossi and Hinrichs (2011, p. 1425) have married both individualism and independence in explaining reluctance of US farmers to cooperate: “Cultural values of individualism and beliefs about the importance of farmer independence could make it difficult to form and sustain effective co-operative farmer organizations.”

## Contemporary interpretations of independence and their relationship with co-operative behaviors among farmers

In this section I aim to demonstrate the pervasiveness of a value in independence among the farmers sampled and to provide examples that demonstrate that, despite its pervasiveness, it is interpreted in multifarious ways when used to explain co-operative behaviors. As well as farmers being asked directly during interview about the extent to which they valued their independence, the issue was also raised by the farmers themselves in wider discussions about the barriers to cooperation. This is important since it demonstrates that the farmers themselves were making a link between a value in independence and its effect on co-operative practices; rather than purely being prompted by the questions posed. In presenting empirical material from the interviews I use a combination of direct quotes, paraphrasing, and summing/summarizing of commonly articulated points. In all cases, the material is drawn from instances where the farmers were directly asked about the value in independence and its relationship to co-operation, or where they had raised it themselves during the course of the semi-structured interviews. It is important to note that farmers were deliberately not provided with a specific definition of what independence was taken to mean. This ensured that farmers provided *their own* interpretation of what it meant to them, and worked towards the objective of demonstrating and explaining the plurality of interpretations.

The interviews revealed a widespread confirmation of a value in independence, with 82% of the sample stating that their independence is important to them. Both materialist and essentialist origins of a value in independence were evident. Several farmers argued that the isolation and insularity of farming was the principal cause of the independence virtue and that the insular lifestyle could attract a certain type of person that would value his or her independence highly. Others, meanwhile, suggested it was something more innate to farmers, as either “bred into” them, as “inbuilt” or “ingrained”:

It's [the value in independence] because of the nature of the way that we've been brought up, we do *naturally* work better on our own and, if I work in a big group, I do struggle ... [Mixed arable and livestock farmer, Tamar, emphasis added]

Essentialist arguments such as these are used to demonstrate the persistence of the virtue but they can also be dangerous. This is because they allow historically particular interpretations of the virtue (e.g., as individualistic) to appear as “natural,” longstanding, and irrefutable. The following examples provide further evidence of a broad association between the value in independence and a reluctance to cooperate:

They're a very independent breed, small farmers. And by default, if they start getting working together, you know, I think that is the biggest obstacle. It's a state of mind, it comes down to personalities ... the whole idea of being a small farmer is you are independent. [Arable farmer, Peterborough]

... I value our independence, the only contract we have on the farm is the sheep shearer, we do absolutely everything else ourselves because I like to retain my independence and don't like to rely on someone else coming to do something if I can do it myself. [Mixed arable and livestock farmer, Grafton]

[Farmers are] all independent; that's why they don't work together very well I think, you know. [Mixed arable and livestock farmer, Tamar]

If a whole load of you got together and co-operated it would probably be easier, but that's, it's just traditionally how farmers are, [they] are independent really. [Arable farmer, Grafton]

As this last example demonstrates, it would be wrong to suggest that farmers are not aware of the potential benefits of cooperating and it suggests that a normative value in independence (Emery and Franks 2012) acts as a barrier to co-operation, and can therefore be to farmers' disadvantage. This is well demonstrated by an anecdote relayed by a farmer from Peterborough. The reluctance of a group of his neighbors to pool their resources to buy some land meant that they all ended up missing out to a larger buyer with greater purchasing power:

Res.—farmers are such a stuck-up lot of buggers, they will not cooperate. They'd sooner stick their head in the sand and bury themselves rather than admit that they need assistance.

Int.—And where do you think that sort of attitude comes from?

Res.—It's ingrained, isn't it? It's born and bred ... They look to me and say, "I wonder what..." They do say, "Well, you've done this and you've done that," and I say, "Well, you know, there's nothing to stop you doing it. You've just got to pull your fingers out." I mean, we had, I can tell you, we had a case in point. There was some land came up for sale three months ago in 11 different lots and there was quite a few farmers, small farmers, wanted to buy different fields, and the agents had put it in one lot, sealed bids, one lot, and that's it, and they wouldn't split it. My neighbor and I got them together and said, "Look, if you want this land, you've got to put in a joint bid. We'll put in a joint bid for you, if you like, but you've all got to sit down here and decide what you're going to pay for it." Some of them were willing to pay silly money for individual fields, but would they as hell get together in the end. Now they're all moaning because they couldn't buy it. Well, it's their own fault.

While this farmer shows an awareness of the benefits of working together, it should be noted that he does not present this argument from a moral socialist ("spirit of co-operation," cf. Warman 1922) perspective. His story was one of entrepreneurialism and he had rapidly expanded his business without recourse to social conventions. Indeed, when asked if he co-operates with his neighbors (most of whose farms were considerably smaller than his) he quipped that he usually "buys them out" instead.

In contrast to the frequency with which a lack of co-operation was associated with a value in independence, on no occasion did any of the farmers talk explicitly about individualism. This might be explained by the fact that farmers were not directly questioned about individualism. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this section, many farmers introduced the idea of independence themselves, before they had been specifically questioned about it.

Moreover, in my longer term ethnographic research among English farmers (Emery 2010) individualism was not found to be a common term employed in everyday parlance. Coming closest to a direct expression of individualism was one farmer from the Grafton area, who spoke about farmers as “individuals” and used this to justify why they do not (and, in his view, should not) co-operate. In the following extract co-operation is being discussed during an interview where two farmers were present:

Res.—[Farmers will] never co-operate.

Int.—Why not? Why do you think it’s difficult?

Res.—Well, we’re all individuals, and that’s it. You’re actually competing against yourselves as well...

Int.—Against yourselves?

Res.—Well you’re competing against each other for the same trade aren’t you ...

Int.—So are you involved in any sort of co-operation at all, even on an informal or ad hoc basis?

Res.—We grow strawberries for a group and they’ve got their own agronomist and if I do something new on my farm, that agronomist sees it and he tells the next one, and he’s done that in the past which is losing my advantage of growing things at different times.

The other farmer present then pointed out that while this might be true for fruit production, grain farmers are not in direct competition with their neighbors. This seemed to catch the first farmer off-guard momentarily, but he managed to turn the situation of the grain farmer into one of a contest against his or her neighbors:

Res.—... but you all want, you're all facing the same thing 'cause if that neighbor didn't have it there'd be a bit less corn about wouldn't there? So the people buying it in that area would be a bit nicer to you wouldn't they?

So instead of seeing the buyer as the impediment to achieving a better price, and cooperative bargaining as a route to securing a better price, this farmer continued to see other farmers as direct competitors with whom which any right-minded farmer, should not wish to cooperate.

In the following three sections I aim to demonstrate that while the value of independence is widely held and expressed, its meanings and practical implications (in terms of co-operation) are considerably more varied. Moreover, while individualism does not figure prominently in the articulations of farmers it can, in many instances, be seen to underlie many discussions around independence and co-operation. Indeed, the very fact that it is often conflated with independence, while not itself being expressed, demonstrates its ideological workings.

### *Neighborliness*

The neighborliness of which Warman spoke in the 1920s was still clearly evident among the sample of modern English farmers. Neighborliness, or ad-hoc reciprocity as the survey referred to it, was the most commonly cited type of cooperation among the entire sample of farmers (with 58% of all respondents engaged in it). This type of cooperation involved farmers helping each other out on an infrequent “as needs arise” or emergency basis and was often limited to a small number of strong relationships.<sup>6</sup> Most typically, such interactions would not involve any financial transactions. It was still important, however, that relationships were seen as fair and equitable, and where successfully established they often spanned multiple generations. Respondents referred to it as a type of insurance, as engagement in informal reciprocal relations provides assurances that help will be available from one's neighbors when the need arises. Despite the common prevalence of neighborly practices among the sample there was a notable difference according to farm size. Whereas, respectively, approximately 80% and 90% of small- (<100 Ha) and medium- (100-150 Ha) sized farms in the sample actively engaged in informal

---

<sup>6</sup> Henrich and Henrich (2007) report that in tit-for-tat reciprocal relationships fewer interactants are often favored since it allows for easier accounting of past behaviors.

ad-hoc reciprocity the same was true for only 30% of large (>250 Ha) farms (also supported by Sutherland and Burton 2011, p. 253).

One farmer from Tamar, in the Southwest of England, pointed out that, although it is important to be able to call upon neighbors during emergencies, the value in independence among farmers means that they do not tend to engage in neighborly help “as a matter of course” but only when “pushed.” When asked about the reasons for a value in independence, he said it had just always been there in farming and stems from a “healthy competition.”

### *Formal cooperative membership*

Despite formal agricultural cooperation being espoused as a means of protecting the small farmer (e.g., by the European Commission (Morley 1975, p. 17), and in contrast to the patterns of informal reciprocal cooperation in the previous section, the membership of formal cooperatives among the sample of farmers was entirely limited to large farm enterprises. Almost a third of large farms (>250 Ha) in the sample were involved in formal buying and marketing cooperatives, whereas none of the small- and medium-sized farms were similarly involved. In sum, then, this suggests that smaller farms are more likely to engage in neighborly informal cooperation, whereas larger farms are more likely to engage in formal cooperatives. Moreover, this tends to suggest that, contra to Warman’s aspirations, the spirit of neighborliness among small farmers does not seem to translate into membership of formal cooperatives, and that there are alternative motives for informal and formal cooperation. Although drawn from only a small sample this observation has been supported in the literature (Beal 1954; Gasson 1977; Morley 1975; Nielsen Farmers’ Panel 1963). Gasson (1977) and Beal (1954) suggest that not only is there no correlation between informal cooperation and membership of formal cooperatives, but that this is particularly pronounced among high status farmers. Beal showed that high status farmers are more likely to be members of cooperatives, while Gasson showed a negative correlation between high status individuals on the board of directors of formal cooperatives and informal cooperative practices: i.e., those farmers responsible for the management and decision-making within the cooperative tended to be higher-status farmers and also less likely to engage in informal neighborly cooperation (Gasson 1977, p. 114). So what does this suggest about the motives for formal cooperation and its relationship with a “spirit” of neighborliness? To illustrate, consider one farmer (Howard [pseudonym]) from Grafton in the West Midlands of England who sits on

the Committee of the local Crop Marketing Group. Howard does not engage in any informal cooperative/reciprocal activities with neighbors and prefers to use contractors for any jobs that he cannot do for himself. When I asked about the benefits of cooperation he replied “you can never buy anything cheaper, and you can never sell anything better. I’m on the Marketing Committee ... so I’m in there with another 15 people and we make a decision every month as to what proportion and what price we mandate the sales at.” Based on the range of responses I had heard to this question from other farmers I curiously asked whether he also thinks there are any non-financial benefits of cooperation, such as bringing farmers together or strengthening the community. “I think money drives,” he replied. Rather than being an apparatus for the mutual self-help of the small farmer, therefore, it appears that formal cooperation proceeds largely on the basis of rational self-interest and the pursuit of individual economic satisfaction (Smith 1961, p. 144).

*To share machinery or to use contractors?*

Many of the discussions with farmers on the subject of cooperation focused on the use of machinery in production and, in particular, on the relative merits and drawbacks of sharing machinery/labor with neighbors vis-à-vis the use of agricultural contractors. Many farmers, like Howard from the previous example, preferred to use contractors as they saw being reliant upon neighbors as an infringement on their independence and the associated imperative for timeliness (Emery and Franks 2012, p. 225):

Int.—Do you engage in any more informal sharing of equipment or labor ?

Res.—It’s easier to contract.

Int.—Mm. Less of a risk?

Res.—Those unessential jobs can be contracted, the essential ones you do yourself, that’s really what it comes down to.



Int.—So why do you think that some people co-operate on machinery rather than contract?

Res.—You'd better go and ask them that! ... The difference between a good farmer and a bad farmer is about five hours and quite honestly if you can't do it yourself in that five hours you won't do it at the right time, so I think that's the essential part of it. [Howard, arable farmer, Grafton]

There are a range of reasons why sharing might be favored to contracting and vice versa. Many of these reasons are practical. Livestock farmers, for instance, pointed out that they tend to have relatively small machines that they use on an almost daily basis, which does not lend itself to sharing. Arable farmers, in contrast, require large, expensive machines (such as combine harvesters), which might sit idle for much of the year and can therefore be sensibly shared if it is possible to coordinate production activities with neighbors. Rather than elaborating the various practical constraints on cooperative decision-making I want to focus instead on the varying motives for such behaviors and, in particular, their associations with a concept of being “in control” or independent.

It has been suggested that the rising cost of agricultural machinery has influenced the likelihood of machinery sharing among farmers. Interestingly, however, there are competing interpretations of this relationship. Sutherland and Burton (2011) argue that while others have indicated a proliferation of machinery sharing on account of rising costs, their evidence suggests the opposite to be true. These alternatives may be consistent, however, if farmers are more reluctant to loan out the expensive equipment they own (for fear of damage) on the one hand, but at the same time that there are more farmers seeking formalized sharing arrangements as a means of spreading costs on the other. Indeed, among the sample of farmers in the current study both motives were apparent. Several farmers cited the rising cost of machinery as a reason for more cooperation between farmers, whilst others cited the rising cost as a reason for there being less cooperation (and more use of contractors) between farmers. This might suggest alternative financial motives for alternative types of cooperation (varying levels of formality), but it might also be underlain by alternative notions of autonomy. To explore this further I will now briefly consider three farmers.

Dave, an arable tenant farmer from Grafton, argued that farmers are traditionally independent and self-reliant, which acts as an impediment to sharing machinery with neighbors. This is because, he argued, “you are so used to rowing your own boat” that it is difficult to start having to make decisions with somebody else. Brian, a mixed livestock and arable farmer, also from Grafton, meanwhile, said that many farmers in the area had shifted to a share-cropping arrangement, whereby all of the production work was undertaken by contractors. This might be true, he suggested, for older farmers who, rather than (for instance) letting out their land to other farmers, preferred to use contractors. This would allow them to maintain control and decision-making responsibility for the farm, which is part of the “lifestyle” of the farm that they value and want to hold on to. Younger farmers, particularly in the Peterborough area, had also followed this route, and tended to pursue other business interests in the time freed up by the use of contractors. Thomas, a dairy farmer from Tamar, in contrast said that he had gone into a machinery sharing arrangement with a neighbor rather than use contractors because “we generally like to be in control of what we *do*” (emphasis added). This suggests that independence is retained by working with others, rather than relying on contractors to undertake the farming work. And in terms of the independence virtue, Thomas suggested it comes from being “protective of one’s own” and not wanting to be seen as the “ones who are doing the least well.” This suggests that a value in independence has some association with farming reputation, and that farmers may keep themselves to themselves because of a “fear of exposure to the potential judgment of others” (Emery and Franks 2012, p. 228).

In the above examples it might be possible to pull out a relationship between control and independence. There is, however, a distinction between the desire to retain control over *decisions* and the desire to retain control over *practices*. The farmer that uses contractors gives up some control over his/her farm *work*, whereas the farmer that shares with neighbors gives up some control over his/her decisions: you just have to “think like one big farm” said one farmer from Grafton who was joint venture farming with two neighbors. The use of contractors tends to maintain an individualistic approach and the virtue of independence is used by the farmers to explain this preference. And although it might allow a sense of control to be retained, it also entails a dependency on others (with interests different to those of the farmer) to carry out the actual farm work. The sharing of machinery, however, recognizes the interdependence of

farmers and it is particularly interesting that Thomas, in the above example, recognizes that independence and interdependence are not mutually exclusive.

### Individualism and cooperative behaviors

This section has explored the tension between individualist and altruistic motives for various types of agricultural cooperation and the interpretations of independence given by farmers and others in their explanation or promotion of farming behaviors. It first presented two alternative ideological motivations for cooperation which relied on an extension of individualistic interpretations of cooperative independence on the one hand (Scott) and an extension of an altruistic spirit on the other (Warman). It was already apparent from Warman's usage of independence—as something opposed to cooperation—that individualistic motives for cooperation were in the ascendancy. It is no surprise therefore that the evidence presented in the second sub-section suggests that (1) individualistic motives underlie much formal agricultural cooperation; (2) it is large, higher status farmers that benefit most from economic cooperatives (despite putative contrary claims for the early intentions of agricultural cooperation), and, moreover; (3) that such individualist motives are also to be found in the realm of cooperation in production and, even, in neighborliness. While the prevalence of neighborliness suggests that altruistic *practices* remain strong among English farmers, an examination of interpretations of the virtue of independence suggests that the (misconstrued) *values* underlying attitudes to such behaviors may be less altruistic (cf. Riches 2000). Not only, therefore, were Warman's hopes for the spirit of neighborliness to be carried through into the realm of formal agricultural cooperation not realized but it appears that the opposite was the case. The spirit of individualism evident in the formal cooperative movement appears instead to have flown back the other way to ingress upon attitudes and motivations toward neighborly practices. This is evidenced, for instance, by essentialized interpretations of independence that are at one and the same time seen as an impediment to neighborly cooperation and associated with ideas of “competitiveness” or protecting reputation. Such essentializing, I have shown, has the effect of masking ideology, which works precisely by giving new interpretations to apparently fixed and irrefutable cultural values.

Moreover, I argue that the principal way that the virtue of independence gets misconstrued is through the misrecognition of *from whom* independence is sought. By seeing their neighbors as competitors, or even enemies, English farmers erroneously focus their efforts at upholding the important virtue of independence in opposition to their farming peers. This simultaneously diverts their attention from more structural/economic forms of dependency and prevents the recognition of their mutual interests—of an interdependent interpretation of independence—to attain collective independence against such structural forms. For, as several farmers who were at a loss with the lack of cooperation were at pains to point out, it is rare that your farming neighbors are actually in direct competition with you. The result, therefore, is a misconstrued interpretation of independence which may lead to non-cooperative behaviors and actions that actually result in greater dependency on higher powers (such as supermarkets and processors that monopolize the market and dictate prices to farmers). I illustrate this with the thoughts of Philip, one of few remaining small farmers in the Peterborough area, who had seen the scale and intensity of farming increase rapidly around him. Between the 1930s and 1960s, he argued, farmers used to cooperate “an awful lot.” Then from the 1960s “people became more *independent*” (emphasis added) and wanted their own expensive machinery, which, he pointed out “is where they went wrong economically,” because to realize this so-called independence (from the need for cooperative practices for instance) “they borrowed too much” and wound up in a position of indebtedness and dependency on the banks and lending institutions. An individualistic and anti-cooperative interpretation of independence, therefore, ultimately led to a loss of financial independence (see Marsden et al. 1989, p. 3).

## Conclusion

The prescriptions of economic individualism, while appealing to the values of equality and liberty, in fact amount to their denial. (Lukes 2006 [1973], p. 123)

In the terms of Raymond Williams introduced at the outset of this paper, I have attempted to explore (at least one facet of) the relationship between the *persistence* and *historicity* of the virtue of independence. Independence, as a virtue among farmers, has persisted on account of its

importance as a guide to practice. It has also persisted, however, because of its mutability and its openness to interpretation. This ensures its continuing salience according to changing times and changing contexts but it also renders it susceptible to manipulation according to alternative interests and ideologies, which may allure precisely because they appeal to the *apparent* longevity, consistency, and irrefutability of the values that are held most dear. This leads, as I have attempted to show in this paper, to a complex and rather confusing relationship between values and cooperative practices. And on account of this, it has not been straightforward to determine whether formal cooperation or neighborly practices maintain or denigrate independence (in whatever range of combinations). I have shown, however, that even in apparently altruistic practices an individualistic interpretation of independence is used to explain motivations. Just like Riches (2000) argued that individualistic practices can be legitimated within an egalitarian cosmology, so too can apparently altruistic practices be legitimized within—and be constitutive of—an individualistic ideology. If formal and informal practices can be justified as retaining “independence,” while at the same time independence is interpreted as “natural” and “healthy competition” *between* farmers, then the ideology of individualism is upheld by a range of apparently opposing practices and perspectives. Both the blatant synonymy between independence and individualism expressed by Scott and the use of an essentialized interpretation of independence as an inhibitor to more genuinely altruistic practice (by Warman and others) are representative of the same general process. It is common to mistake the persistence of a virtue with fixity rather than mutability. But this mistake actually allows new (and possibly malignant) interpretations to take hold, and enter the realm of the taken-for-granted, while going virtually unnoticed and seldom challenged.

Throughout this paper, and developed along the lines of the quote introducing this section, I have put forward an argument that the conflation of independence with individualism actually amounts to its denial. Lukes develops this argument through recourse to the broader fundamental societal virtues of “liberty” and “equality,” which, he shows, have been “hijacked and harnessed” ideologically by connection to individualistic doctrines “that embody libertarian thinking and promote market-favoring policies, and so pre-emptively exclude alternative ways of framing issues and asking questions” (2006 [1973], p. 9). Independence can be closely associated with the idea of liberty and is the kind of “compelling and seductive” ideal that by appealing to

our “institutions and instincts, to our values and our desires” can be commandeered ideologically to become a dominant way of thought (Harvey 2005, p. 5).

So if, as I have argued in this paper, independence is misinterpreted, misconstrued or manipulated in various guises, and if actual independence is denied by its conflation with individualism, then what exactly should *actual independence* be taken to mean? Just what is *it* that is being denied, and what sort of interpretations and practices are required to uphold this actual independence?

The answers to these questions have been hinted at through the course of the paper, and become clearer if the idea of “actual independence” is associated with Lukes’ interpretation of autonomy. Lukes presents autonomy (along with privacy and self-development) as one of the three faces of liberty and maintains that it is achieved when an individual “subjects the pressures and norms with which he is confronted to conscious and critical evaluation, and forms intentions and reaches practical decisions as the result of independent and rational reflection” (2006 [1973], p. 55). So by taking the taken-for-granted for granted, and by succumbing to the ideological interpretations that are offered, an individual may not be autonomous. And by taking independence to mean independence from one’s farming peers, and without subjecting the *idea* of independence to critical examination, autonomy or actual independence is ironically left wanting. In the first instance, therefore, achieving actual independence requires that the normative ideological underpinnings of that very virtue (and others to boot) are recognized and reflected upon. Once the shadow of individualism has been cast off, and it is distinguished from, rather than conflated with, independence then other potentialities emerge; independence can be interpreted and achieved differently.

The song of the land, the song of rural labor, the song of delight in the many forms of life with which we all share our physical world, is too important and too moving to be tamely given up, in an embittered betrayal, to the confident enemies of all significant and *actual independence* and renewal. (Williams 1973, p. 325, emphasis added)

In Williams’ rather engaging and poetic prose, actual independence is contingent upon the sharing of the physical world in the flows of life and work. Hence, it is through interdependence,

rather than in opposition to it, that independence as autonomy can be seen to emerge.<sup>7</sup> This sort of interdependent independence, according to Goldschmidt (1971, p. 137), requires that individuals “maintain collaborative arrangements with their fellows, without coercion or subordination to some superior authority.” Compared to their continental European counterparts English farmers have little recent history of direct political action. The conflation of independence with individualism—and the attendant viewing of one’s actual and metaphorical “neighbors” as one’s “enemies”—offers just one explanation for this lack of political action and the lack of any widespread support for mutually beneficial agricultural cooperation. I believe it to be a particularly potent mechanism, however, since what is being denied is farmers’ autonomy over their autonomy: their freedom to transcend the constraining and illusory options that ideology proffers. Hence, the practices and relationships through which farmers seek to uphold their independence, if left unchecked, can actually increase their dependency on the structural and economic forces that impose very real limitations on the everyday rhythms of their work and lives (such as supermarkets and lenders) (Marsden et al. 1989). It would be wrong to suppose, however, that farmers are simply cultural dupes with no agentive powers to negotiate their own, alternative moral positions. If their remonstrations and grievances with structural forms of power, however, are not channeled collectively then the power of those grievances to bring about effectual changes is significantly diminished. Of course, increased political activism is just one possible response to a refined and autonomously informed interpretation of independence. The purpose of exposing the mechanisms by which independence and individualism are conflated is more than to simply encourage greater political action; it is to open up the array of imaginable possibilities (for interpretation and practice) that the recognition of that conflation allows.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to the School of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Development at Newcastle University, which funded the initial writing of this paper. The original research on which this paper draws was funded by the Rural Economy and Land Use Program (RELU RES-240-25-0019), and I am grateful to the Principal Investigator of that research—Jeremy Franks—for his

---

<sup>7</sup> Maxey (2006) has demonstrated the necessity of an interdependent form of independence in the “alternative” agriculture movement.

support. For comments and discussions on earlier drafts of the paper I thank Maria Kastrinou, Paul Stock, Jérémie Forney, Arshad Isakjee, the Editor, and the three anonymous reviewers. The reviews, in particular, have substantially strengthened the original submission.

## References

- Bauman, Z. 2001. Foreword: individually together. In *Individualization*, ed. U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim, xiv–xix. London: Sage.
- Beal, G.M. 1954. *The roots of participation in farmer cooperatives*. Ames, IA: College Book Store.
- Blackstock, K., K. Brown, B. Davies, and P. Shannon 2006. Individualism, cooperation, and conservation in Scottish farming communities. In *Rural governance: international perspectives*, ed. L. Cheshire, V. Higgins, and G. Lawrence, 191–207. Hoboken: Routledge.
- Cogeca 2010. Agricultural co-operation in Europe—main issues and trends. In *Agricultural co-operation in Europe—main issues and trends*. Brussels: Cogeca.
- Cohen, A.P. 1994. *Self-consciousness: an alternative anthropology of identity*. London: Routledge.
- Cooperatives UK 2012. The UK co-operative economy 2012: Alternatives to austerity. In *The UK co-operative economy 2012: alternatives to austerity*. Manchester: Cooperatives UK Ltd.
- Desmarais, A.A. 2002. PEASANTS SPEAK—The Vía Campesina: consolidating an international peasant and farm movement. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 29: 91–124.
- Dumont, L. 1986. *Essays on individualism: modern ideology in anthropological perspective*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elias, N. 1991. *The society of individuals*. New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Emery, S.B. 2014 in press. Hard work, productivity, and the management of the farmed environment in anthropological perspective. In *Contemporary issues in management*, ed. L. Hamilton, L. Mitchell, and A. Mangan. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.



- Emery, S.B. 2010. *In better fettle: improvement, work, and rhetoric in the transition to environmental farming in the North York Moors*. Doctoral thesis. Department of Anthropology, Durham University. Available from <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/379/>.
- Emery, S.B., and J.R. Franks 2012. The potential for collaborative agri-environment schemes in England: can a well-designed collaborative approach address farmers' concerns with current schemes? *Journal of Rural Studies* 28: 218–231.
- Fearne, A. 1998. The evolution of partnerships in the meat supply chain: insights from the British beef industry. *Supply Chain Management: An International Journal* 3: 214–231.
- Foucault, M. 1976. *The will to knowledge: history of sexuality: 1*. London: Penguin Books.
- Gasson, R. 1977. Farmers' participation in cooperative activities. *Sociologia Ruralis* 17: 107–123.
- Gasson, R. 1973. Goals and values of farmers. *Journal of Agricultural Economics* 24: 521–542.
- Goldschmidt, W. 1971. Independence as an element in pastoral social systems. *Anthropological Quarterly* 44: 132–142.
- Gröger, B.L. 1981. Of men and machines: co-operation among French family farmers. *Ethnology* 20: 163–176.
- Harvey, D. 2005. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Henrich, N., and J. Henrich 2007. *Why humans cooperate: a cultural and evolutionary explanation*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Holstein, J.A., and J.F. Gubrium 1995. *The active interview*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Ilbery, B.W. 1983. Goals and values of hop farmers. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 8: 329–341.
- Lawton, J., P. Brotherton, V. Brown, C. Elphick, A. Fitter, J. Forshaw, R. Haddow, S. Hilborne, R. Leafe, and G. Mace 2010. Making space for nature: a review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network. *Report to DEFRA*.
- Lukes, S. 2006 [1973]. *Individualism*. Colchester: ECPR Press.
- Macfarlane, A. 1978. The origins of English individualism: some surprises. *Theory and Society* 6: 255–277.

- Marsden, T., R. Munton, S. Whatmore, and J. Little 1989. Strategies for coping in capitalist agriculture: an examination of the responses of farm families in British agriculture. *Geoforum* 20: 1–14.
- Marsden, T., R. Munton, S. Whatmore, and J. Little 1986. Towards a political economy of capitalist agriculture: a British perspective. *International Journal of Urban and regional research* 10: 498–521.
- Maxey, L. 2006. Can we sustain sustainable agriculture? Learning from small-scale producer-suppliers in Canada and the UK. *The Geographical Journal* 172: 230–244.
- May, D.E. 2012. Non-economic drivers influencing farmers' incentives to cooperate: do they remain robust through policy changes? *Journal of Rural Cooperation* 40: 217–238.
- May, D.E., and G.J. Tate 2011. Exploring economic and social-psychological factors in explaining farmers' willingness to participate in cooperative alliances. *International Journal of Strategic Business Alliances* 2: 329–346.
- McKenzie, A.J., S.B. Emery, J.R. Franks, and M.J. Whittingham 2013. FORUM: Landscape-scale conservation: collaborative agri-environment schemes could benefit both biodiversity and ecosystem services, but will farmers be willing to participate? *Journal of Applied Ecology* 50: 1274–1280.
- Morley, J. 1975. *British agricultural cooperatives*. London: Hutchinson Benham.
- Nielsen Farmers' Panel 1963. A Nielsen Farmers' Panel study of cooperatives and buying groups. In *A Nielsen Farmers' Panel study of cooperatives and buying groups*. Oxford: Nielsen Farmers' Panel Special Research Division.
- Niska, M., H.T. Vesala, and K.M. Vesala 2012. Peasantry and entrepreneurship as frames for farming: reflections on farmers' values and agricultural policy discourses. *Sociologia Ruralis* 52: 453–469.
- Pimbert, M.P. 2008. *Towards food sovereignty: reclaiming autonomous food systems*: International institute for environment and development (IIED).
- Polanyi, K. 1945. *Origins of our time: the great transformation*. London: Victor Gallancz Ltd.
- Pretty, J. 1991. Farmers' extension practice and technology adaptation: agricultural revolution in 17–19th century Britain. *Agriculture and Human Values* 8: 132–148.
- Rew, R.H. 1913. *An agricultural faggot: a collection of papers on agricultural subjects*. Westminster: P.S. King and Son.

- Riches, D. 2000. The holistic person; or, the ideology of egalitarianism. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 6: 669–685.
- Rossi, A.M., and C.C. Hinrichs 2011. Hope and skepticism: farmer and local community views on the socio-economic benefits of agricultural bioenergy. *Biomass and Bioenergy* 35: 1418–1428.
- Sargent, M. 1982. *Agricultural co-operation*. Aldershot: Gower.
- Schneider, S., and P.A. Niederle 2010. Resistance strategies and diversification of rural livelihoods: the construction of autonomy among Brazilian family farmers. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 37: 379–405.
- Scott, L. 1922. Preface. In *Agricultural cooperation in England and Wales*, ed. W.H. Warman. London: Williams and Norgate.
- Siebert, R., M. Toogood, and A. Knierim 2006. Factors affecting European farmers' participation in biodiversity policies. *Sociologia Ruralis* 46: 318–340.
- Smith, L.P.F. 1961. *The evolution of agricultural co-operation*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Spriggs, J., J. Hobbs, and A. Fearn 2000. Beef producer attitudes to coordination and quality assurance in Canada and the UK. *The International Food and Agribusiness Management Review* 3: 95–109.
- Stock, P.V., and J. Forney forthcoming. A theory of farmer autonomy: a comparison of Switzerland and New Zealand. *Journal of Rural Studies*.
- Stofferahn, C. 2004. Individualism or cooperation: preferences for sharing machinery and labor. *Journal of Cooperatives* 18: 1–17.
- Stofferahn, C.W. 2010. South Dakota soybean processors: the discourse of conversion from cooperative to limited liability corporation. *Journal of Cooperatives* 24: 13–43.
- Sullivan, S., E. McCann, R. De Young, and D. Erickson 1996. Farmers' attitudes about farming and the environment: a survey of conventional and organic farmers. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 9: 123–143.
- Sutherland, L.-A., and R.J.F. Burton 2011. Good farmers, good neighbors? The role of cultural capital in social capital development in a Scottish farming community. *Sociologia Ruralis* 51: 238–255.
- Van der Ploeg, J.D. 2008. *The new peasantries: struggles for autonomy and sustainability in an era of empire and globalization*. London: Earthscan.

- Warman, W.H. 1922. *Agricultural co-operation in England and Wales*. London: Williams and Norgate.
- Weber, M. 1930. *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. London: Routledge.
- Williams, R. 1973. *The country and the city*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Wittman, H., A.A. Desmarais, and N. Wiebe 2010. *Food sovereignty: reconnecting food, nature, and community*. Oxford: Pambazuka.
- Worsley, P. 1971. Two blades of grass: rural cooperatives in agricultural modernization. In *Two blades of grass: rural cooperatives in agricultural modernization*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.